

The Holocaust Historiography Project

Admissions against Interest about the Holocaust

No human soap

Book revisits horrifying question about the Holocaust

- Atlanta man says Nazis made soap of Jews

By Jim Galloway
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Before sunrise on a cold March morning in 1970, a rabbi and an architect slipped over the fence to Greenwood Cemetery in Atlanta to scout out a burial site for four bars of soap.

A hasty funeral service was conducted later that afternoon -- Jewish law required quick interment for the green-gray cakes, which had surfaced days before. About 35 people, most of them survivors of European concentration camps, gathered around a small hole dug at the base of the local Holocaust memorial.

None had any doubt that the soap bars were made from human beings.

The architect, Ben Hirsch, devoted a chapter to the incident in a memoir published this spring and urged scholars to take a closer look at the topic.

As a result, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has barred Hirsch from conducting a book-signing on its premises in Washington. Emory University professor Deborah Lipstadt, who triumphed over a Holocaust denier in a British libel trial this year, endorses the decision.

During World War II, the Nazis killed millions through gassing and starvation, torture and firing squads. They conducted bizarre human experiments, harvested hair and gold fillings, and used human skin for lampshades. But **there's no proof that Nazis made soap of their victims, museum officials said, and the institution won't endorse any book that argues otherwise.**

"[Hirsch] was advocating that we explore what is essentially a dead end," said Peter Black, chief historian at the Holocaust museum.

[...]

Hirsch also tells the story of the four bars of soap in Atlanta. They were found by a Jewish soldier who was part of a U.S. force that liberated a concentration camp near Stettin, Germany, near Frankfurt. The soldier saw the soap cakes, which had been stamped "RIF."

Historians say the initials stand for *Reich Industrie Fett*, or Reich Industrial Fat. But at the time, the "I" was widely interpreted as a "J", and the initials for *Reines Juden Fett* -- or Pure Jewish Fat.

[...]

'We don't need the soap'

Holocaust history is constantly being adjusted as new evidence and research surface. [...]

Such revisions, while common enough in other historical fields, are handled with extreme care, with the expectation that Holocaust deniers will twist any change in the record into a retreat from the truth.

But Lipstadt, the Emory professor and author, said deniers aren't driving the standards of historians. [...]

At the top is a desire for rock-solid historical accuracy. "It's important because you don't want people to say it's demi-fiction," Lipstadt said.

Soap-making has been a handy metaphor for Nazi cruelty, she said, but its disappearance from the resume of Nazis atrocities shouldn't make much difference. **"The truth that we know is bad enough. We don't need the soap,"** she said.

[...]

The Holocaust museum says it has tested some bars of soap for human DNA and found nothing.

[...]

Alternate headline: "Bizarre burial prods Holocaust angst."

Send all questions and comments to webmaster@historiography-project.org.